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ABSTRACT

To understand better the ethical inclinations of public relations students, a study examined students' self-reported ethical beliefs and behaviors regarding their college work. In two mid-Atlantic state universities, a questionnaire was administered to communication classes for college juniors and seniors during the winter term 1988, yielding 258 usable responses (70% of the eligible sample). The questionnaire consisted of 26 items in each of three "belief" and two "behavior" situations relating to college work, such as writing term papers, taking tests, and doing homework. Items were measured on five-point response categories ranging from "very unethical" to "not at all unethical," and examined the ethical beliefs of public relations students, their perceptions of the ethical beliefs of most college students, their perceptions of the ethical beliefs of their professors, their self-reported ethical behaviors, and their perceptions of the ethical behaviors of most college students. Factor analysis identified four primary ethical dimensions: (1) traditional behaviors (unethical behaviors among students); (2) normative behaviors (caused when social pressures exert influence on behavior regardless of personal beliefs); (3) collegial-support behaviors (opportunistic behaviors related to the intent to create a supportive environment for involvement in unethical behaviors); and (4) substitution behaviors (for example, taking a test for another student). Results indicated that the students' ethical beliefs were moderately high, but were rated lower than those of their professors and higher than those of their colleagues. (One figure and four tables of data are included, and 61 footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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ETHICAL INCLINATIONS OF FUTURE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

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ETHICAL INCLINATIONS OF FUTURE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies four primary ethical dimensions in five situations among 258 undergraduate public relations students in two mid-Atlantic state universities. These dimensions are "traditional," "normative," "collegial-support," and "substitution" behaviors.

Analyses of these dimensions by doubly repeated measures ANOVA designs, spatial techniques, and multitrait-multimethod matrices indicate that the students' self-reported ethical beliefs are multidimensional. Their beliefs are moderately high, lower than beliefs they perceive held by their professors, and higher than those they perceive held by "most college students." Self-reported behaviors considered most ethical are those associated with "collegial support." These "collegial-support" behaviors are also the most practiced by the respondents and, in their opinion, by their colleagues. "Traditional" and "substitution" behaviors are the least ethical, and occur less frequently than "normative" behavior, which places second in all five situations. These self-reported behaviors suggest an interpretation based on the theory of reasoned action.

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ETHICAL INCLINATIONS OF FUTURE PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

Three major events have heightened nationwide concerns about ethical conduct within the past two years. In November 1986, the largest insider-trading scandal in Wall Street history revealed that some stock-trading activities were conducted in an ethical quicksand, with wanton disregard for the overall interests of investors. Ivan F. Boesky, the speculator who generated the scandal, was sentenced to three years in prison, a term considered by some as reasonably tough; however, others felt "he worked out a very sweet deal with prosecutors, considering the magnitude of his scandalous operations."[1]

Second, in September 1987, Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. dropped out of the race for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination in part because of revelations that he had used, without attribution, portions of speeches by such prominent politicians as Neil Kinnock (leader of the British Labor Party), Robert F. Kennedy, and Hubert H. Humphrey; that as a first-year law student he had used, again without proper attribution, portions of a law-review article; and that he had exaggerated his academic record.

Finally, in December 1987, Michael K. Deaver, a former White House deputy chief of staff in the Reagan administration and head of a Washington, D.C., public relations and lobbying firm, was convicted for repeatedly lying under oath to a congressional subcommittee and to a federal grand jury in attempts to deflect allegations that his lobbying violated the Ethics in Government Act of 1978. The New York Times described Deaver's activities on behalf of his

clients as "the unabashed trading of influence."[2] The Washington Times, in describing Deaver as a "master influence peddler," comments: "The declining esteem of the PR industry has been diminished still further by his [Deaver's] presence -- not because he has done anything his colleagues wouldn't do, but because PR, like scrapple, gets uglier the closer you look . . . "[3]

Similarly, Lyn Nofziger, who resigned in January 1982 from the Reagan administration as its political director to found a lobbying firm, was convicted in February 1988 for also violating the 1978 Ethics in Government Act. One of the charges against Nofziger had a public relations ring: improperly lobbying two National Security Council staffers for the Fairchild Republic Corporation, manufacturers of the A10 antitank aircraft; and attempting to influence other White House officials on behalf of the Wedtech Corporation and the National Marine Engineers Beneficial Association. At the very least, all of these events call to question the ethics and credibility of public relations practitioners.

Recent attention has also focused on the need for socially responsible actions among U.S. institutions and for ethical conduct among U.S. publics. For U.S. institutions, their ethical actions are the most important indicators of their social responsibilities as perceived by the public.[4] A 1986 Gallup Poll showed, however, that 63 percent of Americans were dissatisfied with the country's ethical standards.[5] The Public Relations Society of America underscores the need for ethical and moral conduct among its members. Programs for the Society's 1987 national conference, "Public Relations: Credibility in an Incredible World," were "designed to help us raise our own credibility and that of the organizations we serve."[6]

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni notes that within the past decade about two-thirds of America's 500 largest corporations were involved in various forms of illegal behaviors.[7] Polls by the Opinion Research Corporation indicate that more than 50 percent of the public believe that the ethical and moral practices of public relations practitioners are "only fair at best," that only 6 percent of business journalists believe that large U.S. corporations observe high ethical standards, but that 75 percent of such journalists consider "keeping high ethical standards" a major corporate responsibility.[8] Two major implications are apparent from these findings.

First, for the public relations practitioner, ethical standards are important because "significant numbers of people make important decisions because of what public relations people do and say."[9] The very nature of public relations requires that practitioners deal with many ethics: practitioners' ethics, clients' ethics, and sets of ethics for communicating with specific publics.[10] Thus, the peculiar quandary of public relations requires that practitioners consider the morality of an action by frequently raising numerous ethical questions and concerns and by carefully measuring their actions against various theories of moral philosophy.[11] For example, is a <u>prima facie</u> duty to a client outweighed by an obligation to act on behalf of a larger constituency?

Second, it is time public relations practitioners and educators started addressing, from the grassroots, the ethical dilemmas facing the practice, even in the academic milieu. Some believe that students develop negative attitudes and views toward public relations quite early in college.[12] Cline found, in a content analysis of 12 introductory texts on mass communication, " . . . a fierce anti-public relations stance hardly off-set by some grudging

acknowledgement of the existence of PRSA, codes of ethics and a few honest practitioners."[13] This suggests that public relations students need to be aware of the ethical issues that they will confront in the field and the attitudes they will confront in others. An approach to establishing that awareness is that public relations professors should begin teaching courses in macro public relations, that is, courses which "analyze the impact of large public relations campaigns on American society or significant parts of it."[14] Such courses should have a strong ethics component that takes into account realistic situations that have clear ethical implications for practitioners.[15]

Some colleges have incorporated such courses into their business and journalism curricula. Forty-seven percent of undergraduate business schools and 34 percent of graduate business schools accredited by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) "offer a special course whose primary focus is the ethical or moral component of business decisions."[16] In 1984, about 117 programs in journalism and mass communication offered courses in ethics, an increase from the 68 schools that offered such courses in 1977.[17] Forty-seven percent required their majors to take ethics courses. In addition, 17 schools indicated that they planned to offer a course in ethics, and nine schools were studying that possibility. These courses can address ethics in business and society; however, more realistic teaching could occur if instruction were tied to ethical behavior in the students' college milieu.

Research Questions

Given the lack of base-line data on the ethical inclinations of public relations students about college work, this study investigates four research questions:

- First, what are the self-reported ethical beliefs about college behaviors of future public relations practitioners -- or at least of those who because of their college training may practice public relations?
- Second, how do such beliefs relate to the students' self-reported ethical behaviors?
- Third, what are the differences between the perceived ethical beliefs and behaviors of such students and their perception of the ethical beliefs and behaviors of their peers?
- Finally, what are the differences between the students' ethical beliefs and the ethical beliefs they perceive held by their professors?

In addressing these questions, this paper examines the self-reported beliefs and behaviors among students so that public relations educators (and higher education administrators) can draw meaningful conclusions to enable the faculty to effectively address some issues in and challenges of restoring public confidence in the practice. Thus, such educators and administrators teaching ethics to students can help the business community develop and sustain ethical behavior for two reasons. First, research findings suggest that the levels of moral judgment development are higher for interacting groups who think and talk about ethical issues than the nominal average for the individuals in such groups.[18] Second, businesses have traditionally called upon educators to help nurture the ethics of the corporate environment because of the importance of the educational environment in shaping ethical standards.[19] As Trawick and Darden reported, out of a list of 14 factors that can improve ethics in marketing, formal education was ranked No. 1 by both marketing practitioners

and educators.[20] It is, therefore, possible that seminar- and classroom-type learning environments may encourage future practitioners to increase their senstivities toward ethical and moral issues, and help them to formulate the normative ethical standards for which they should strive. But what is the current pattern of their ethics? There is no published literature on the ethical beliefs and behaviors about college work among future public relations practitioners. This study fills parts of that gap.

Related Research

Empirical investigation into the moral values of college students began during the early decades of the 20th century;[21] however, as recently as 1982, similar research on ethics in public relations was virtually non-existent, and the qualitative research on the subject was minuscule.[22] Even as recently as the spring of 1988, a PRSA task force described only 16 journal articles and two books as the initial readings that extensively dealt with ethical issues in the public relations body of knowledge.[23]

Much of the related research to date on the ethical inclinations of specific groups of college students primarily focuses on the ethics of business students, perhaps because the overall management of businesses requires a complex ethical or moral decision-making process. Three broad areas have been investigated: the ethics of business students, a comparison of the students' ethics with those of managers, and the effects of business ethics courses on ethical beliefs and behaviors.

Students' Ethics

A study by Newstrom and Ruch examined the self-reported ethical behaviors of 231 business students.[24] The authors asked students to repond to each of 17 behaviors by indicating (1) whether they believed it to be unethical, (2) whether they thought most students would consider it unethical, (3) whether they thought their professors would believe it to be unethical, (4) how frequently they engaged in that behavior, and (5) how frequently they believed their peers practiced that behavior. Results indicated that the students believed that their ethical standards were superior to those of their peers, but were less stringent than those of their professors. Other studies showed the concern for ethics among business students and the inadequacy of the development of ethical values among such students.[25]

Stevens[26] administered the Newstrom-Ruch research instrument to 210 undergraduate business students and found that "the ethics of today's business student" was similar to that indentified by Newstrom and Ruch.[27] More recently, Stevens and Richardson[28] employed an expanded version of the 17-item Newstrom-Ruch instrument and found results consistent with those of Newstrom and Ruch[29] and of Stevens.[30]

Comparative Ethics

An early study of business ethics was the comparison of the ethics of graduate and undergraduate business students and liberal arts majors with that of marketing executives.[31] Respondents evaluated ethical practices in 19 situations, which were subsumed into four broad areas: potentially disputable research practices, questions regarding the role and responsibilities of a

research director, social issues, and the value systems for personal conduct. Results showed that such students in general did not have ethical practices that were significantly different from those of executives. In six out of 20 situations, however, the liberal arts majors tended to have slightly higher standards of ethics than the business students, but none of those six significant differences was among the group of five situations on the "value systems for personal conduct." The authors concluded that their results cast doubt on the belief that business students (the younger generation) were a source of new ethics.

Other studies reported that managers or business executives scored significantly higher than undergraduate business students on the personal business ethics scale, thus also indicating that the business student did not seem to represent an emerging source of business ethics.[32]

Communication students were asked to identify the options they would take regarding two ethical situations, to briefly state why they took such options, and to compare their responses with those of a national sample of public relations practitioners.[33] Results indicated, for example, that the students were more willing than practitioners to sacrifice their jobs for the sake of public health or principles, and were less willing to protect an athletic coach who had not violated any laws.

Effects of Courses in Ethics

If the research noted above shows that students differentiate their perceptions of ethical behaviors among different situations, can instruction make a difference? On the one hand, colleges have severe limitations as

environments for molding the ethical behaviors of their students. On the other, it has been suggested that to help increase students' commitment to ethical decision-making, a stronger treatment of business ethics be made in the classroom.[34] Thus some programs accredited by the AACSB offer courses in the socioethical issues of business, and some require the courses of all business majors,[35] even though the AACSB does not require such a course. Because people's ethical standards, particularly those of college students, are anything but fixed, evidence indicates that such courses are valuable in impressing upon business students and managers the value of making ethical decisions, taking moral actions, and understanding the role of professions in contemporary society.[36]

Purcell, for example, reported that a majority of his respondents, MBA graduates of the Amos Tuck Graduate School of Businesss Administration at Dartmouth College, not only found the Management Ethics Seminar useful during the 10 years since they took it, but some observed that a "refresher" course in business ethics would be valuable after college.[37]

A study of 1968-1977 graduates who had taken the required Business, Society and the Individual (BSI) course in the MBA curriculum at Tulane University showed similar results.[38] More than 61 percent said that they had benefited from the course, more than 47 percent said that it had better prepared them for the problems in the real world, and about 44 percent said that they would not have acquired more useful business skills if they had taken an elective course in place of BSI.

More recently, Surlin found that mass communication students enrolled in a Mass Media Ethics course the University of Windsor, Canada, ranked moral

and social issues as more salient at the end of the course than at the beginning.[39] The students showed an increase in their level of self-awareness, and indicated changes in their value system to more closely approximate their "value system ideal," that is, the value system affording the greatest level of ethical self-esteem.

This literature review establishes differences in ethics between students and practitioners and the effects of courses in ethics on ethicalness; however, it fails to show the possible multidimensionality of ethical behavior. The present research also fills some of that gap.

Method

The Sample

A questionnaire on the self-reported beliefs and behaviors about college work was administered by communication professors in two mid-Atlantic state universities. Because there were no classes limited to public relations students, communication classes for juniors and seniors were sampled during winter term, 1988. The goal was to sample as many public realtions students as possible. To encourage honest responses, students were assured anonymity. Participation was voluntary.

Two hundred fifty-eight usable responses were received from sophomores, juniors and seniors in public relations. These represent 70 percent of those students at both universities whose sequence or concentration is public relations.

The Instrument

The research instrument employed in the present study was essentially that used in previous studies,[40] and modified by Stevens and Richardson.[41] It consisted of 26 items in each of three "belief" and two "behavior" situations: ethical beliefs of public relations students, their perceptions of the ethical beliefs of most college students, their perceptions of the ethical beliefs of their professors, their self-reported ethical behaviors, and their perceptions of the ethical behaviors of most college students. These behavior items related to college work, such as writing term papers, taking tests, and doing homework. A final section of the self-administered questionnaire sought demographic information on the students.

Respondents' ethical beliefs were measured on five-point response categories, with "1" representing "very unethical," and "5" representing "not at all unethical." The frequency of the self-reported ethical behaviors was also measured on five-point scales: "1" represented "at every opportunity," while "5" represented "never."

Statistical Analysis

Several statistical procedures were used to answer the research questions and to investigate the multidimensionality of the 26-item behavior statements. The first step was to determine if there were any differences between the (1) students' reported beliefs and their perceptions of the ethical beliefs of their professors, (2) students' beliefs and their perceptions of the beliefs of most college students, and (3) students' reported behaviors and their perceptions of the ethical behaviors of most college students. Scheffe's repeated measures

design, which controls the experimentwise error rate, was used to identify such differences.[42] All responses between pairs of belief and behavior items were different, two non-significantly while the rest were statistically significant at the .05 level or less.

Given the many significant differences between belief and behavior pairs, interpretation required reducing the items to a more manageable set of scores that provided a latent perceptual structure of the students' underlying ethical beliefs. The respondents' report of their beliefs was used to develop the structure because in general behaviors, through a series of intervening constructs, are ultimately determined by their underlying beliefs.[43] Thus, the belief items were felt to have explanatory value for identifying the respondents' perceptual (and conceptual) frames of reference. The set of scores resulting from the analyses allowed for parsimonious tests on the differences between means. The structural reduction was done by using a principal-components analysis with Varimax rotation. The number of factors rotated was determined by the scree of the eigenvalues, the loadings on the eigenvectors, and the stability and interpretability of the rotated factors.

After rotation, dimension scores were formed by grouping items with similar factor patterns of high loadings. Mean item scores were computed for each of the three belief and two behavior situations. To provide a secondary check on the internal consistency of the four primary dimension scores as measures of ethical inclinations, Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients that ranged from .64 to .89 were obtained for the belief and behavior situations. The findings suggested the measurement of the ethical perceptions of the students

as the sum of the four dimension means for three belief and two behavior situations.

To further investigate the research questions, doubly repeated measures ANOVA designs were used to compare the mean scores over situations and dimensions. Correlations were computed in a multitrait-multimethod matrix, as proposed by Campbell and Fiske,[44] to determine the construct validity of the dimension scores.

Finally, principal-components analysis was again used to reduce the space of the item group by situation matrix and to provide a graphic illustration of the space.

Results

Demographics

Seventy-two percent of the respondents were female and 28 percent were male. In regard to age, 22 percent were between 19 and 20, 69 percent were between 21 and 22, and 7 percent were between 23 and 24. The mean age was 21.2 and the median was 21. Two percent of the respondents were sophomores, 28 percent were juniors, and 69 percent were seniors.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis with Varimax orthogonal rotation produced four major factors that were labelled "traditional," "normative," "collegial-support," and "substitution" dimensions, in accordance with the common aspects of the significant items in each factor. Of the original pool of 26 items, 25 loaded

highly (.40+) on one and only one of the four factors (Table 1). Together, these four factors accounted for 50.1 percent of the total variance. One item did not have a significant factor loading: "Interfering with another student's studio or lab work or deliberately misinforming or giving wrong information to another student so he or she will receive a lower grade." The low loading may have resulted from the unwillingness of students to intentionally inflict malice on other students.

Table 1 about here

The "traditional" factor consists of six items: obtaining answers from someone else during an exam, giving answers to someone else during an exam, copying answers off another's exam paper without his or her knowledge, arranging with other students to give or receive answers by the use of signals, using cheat sheets (and related devices) during an exam, and buying a term paper.

This factor clearly addresses characteristics traditionally associated with unethical behaviors among college students. The literature on the measures of cheating behaviors indicates the prevalence among college students of the behaviors in this factor. Such behaviors have even been used as "overall cheating measures."[45]

The "normative" factor reflects a subjective norm. The label is based on Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action, which argues that people are usually quite rational and make systematic use of the information available to them.[46] According to the theory, a person's intention is a function of two major determinants: attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm. The

latter is a person's perception of the social pressures put on him or her by important others to practice or not to practice the behavior in question. While attitudes are a function of behavioral beliefs, subjective norms are a function of normative beliefs of various others in the environment. Thus, it is the subjective norm that may exert pressure on a person to perform or not to perform a given behavior, regardless of the person's individual atitude toward the behavior in question.

The "normative" factor consists of eight items: giving exam questions to students in a later section of the same class, discussing exam questions with students from an earlier section of the same class, working in groups when an instructor has requested that you work by yourself, using an unauthorized "test file" for an exam, using an exam stolen by someone else, changing a test paper from the original one handed in, obtaining an old test from a previous quarter, and making improper use of another's computer file or computer program.

The "collegial-support" factor addresses opportunistic behaviors related to the intent to influence (that is, create a supportive environment for) involvement in unethical behaviors. This factor consists of seven items: failing to report to an instructor unfavorable errors in grading, committing plagiarism, studying from someone else's notes, not contributing a fair share in a group project, falsifying or fabricating a bibliography, copying homework and turning it in as your own, and visiting a professor after an exam to bias his or her grading.

The "substitution" factor consists of four items: taking a test for someone else, having someone else write a term paper for you, having someone else take a test for you, and writing a term paper (or parts of it) for someone else.

Table 2 presents comparative data on the mean scores for the four behavior dimensions in five situations. On all four dimensions, students reported perceptions different from those they perceived held by their professors and other students. The students' dimension means for their beliefs ranged from 1.23 to 2.45, indicating that they had higher ethical inclinations than they think "most college students" had. Other students' scores ranged from 1.98 to 3.26. Perceived professors' beliefs ranged from 1.08 to 1.98, indicating that their beliefs were perceived as the most ethical. When comparisons between the dimension means for self-reported ethical behaviors and other students' behaviors were compared, the students again indicated higher ethical inclinations across all four dimensions. This result is interesting, primarily because it is possible that the respondents understand that the public relations function is the seedbed of the moral or ethical behavior of institutions and the focus of public perception of such behavior. (All the respondents had taken at least one academic course in public relations.) Beyond that, public relations ethics is a major consideration in the perception and analysis of organizational behavior.

Table 2 about here

Two doubly repeated measures ANOVA designs were used to investigate the differences among the dimension scores. Two separate analyses were done, one for the perceived ethical differences among the behaviors, the other for the reported and perceived frequency of behaviors.

For the five situational differences, all ratings were significantly different [$F(2,256)=382.8$, $p < .001$, for perceived ethical beliefs; and $F(1,257)=932.3$, $p < .001$, for perceived frequency of behaviors]. For all four types of behavior, professors were perceived to consider all of the behaviors as less ethical than in the other two situations. In other words, the professors were perceived as the most ethical of the three groups.

Another general finding was that the respondents placed themselves between their professors and "most college students." This is equivalent to seeing oneself as less strict or less moral than members of the clergy, but still more strict or more moral than one's colleagues. This indication of "holier than one's colleagues" was supported by results that on the average other students practiced the behaviors more frequently than the respondents did. Previous research suggests that it is not unusual for one group to believe that it is more ethical than people outside that group.[47]

The differences in ratings across behaviors were also significant, both for ethics ratings of the behaviors [$F(3,255)=583.8$, $p < .001$] and for the frequency ratings [$F(2,256)=382.8$, $p < .001$]. For all situations, the behaviors considered least unethical, that is, the most acceptable, were those associated with "collegial support." These were also the most frequently practiced, both by the respondents and, in their opinion, by their colleagues. "Normative" behavior placed second in all five situations.

The final two measures, "traditional" and "substitution" behaviors, were the least ethical and had a less frequent occurrence than "normative" behavior. While "substitution" was seen as more ethical than "traditional," it was reported to occur less frequently. This flip may be caused by the limitation

of "substitution" behavior to large classes where physical and stylistic anonymities are possible. In three situations -- other students' beliefs, professors' beliefs, and students' behaviors -- the differences between these two concepts were not significant.

The Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix

The degree to which the traits represented by the four dimensions of ethical beliefs were stable over the five situations was investigated, using Campbell and Fiske's multitrait-multimethod matrix.[48] In this method, one considers the correlations within a situation and across situations, with the across situation being differentiated as either monotrait or heterotrait.

A summary of the results from the full 20 x 20 correlation matrix is presented in Tables 3 and 4. The correlations in Table 3 are medians of the correlations, or, more precisely, the algebraic averages of the two middle correlations, since results are summarized over the four traits.

Table 3 about here

Correlations <u>on</u> the diagonal of this matrix represent the heterobelief-monosituation averages. In other words, the median correlation among the four traits in the beliefs of the respondents was .40. The correlations for other students' beliefs (.71) and behaviors (.69) were the highest, indicating that a "halo" effect existed in the respondents' perceptions of their colleagues. On the one hand, those who perceived their colleagues as

ethical, perceived them as generally ethical. On the other, those who perceived their colleagues as unethical perceived them as generally unethical.

The correlations below the diagonal are monobehavior-heterosituation. The strengths of these correlations are a measure of the convergent validity of the behaviors. The perceptions of the behaviors are strongest between the two belief-behavior pairs of the respondent and their perceptions of their colleagues. At the same time, the other correlations show less convergence over the other situations, especially between other students' behavior and the professors' and respondents' beliefs.

The correlations above the diagonal are heterobehavior-heterosituation. All of these correlations are lower than the corresponding correlations below the diagonal.

Table 4 shows the larger matrix summarized by behaviors. The same technique of computing averages as medians was used.

Table 4 about here

Correlations on the diagonal are heterosituation-monobehavior. In other words, the average correlation among "traditional" behavior ratings over the five situations is .175. The average correlations below the diagonal are monosituation-heterobehavior. The correlation between "traditional" and "substitution" behavior is the highest within the five situations. The other five correlations are moderate. The correlations above the diagonal are heterosituation-heterobehavior. All of these correlations are low.

In general, this analysis supports the interpretation that the respondents conceptualize four types of ethical behaviors. This evidence is not as strong as it might be because of the higher heterotrait-monosituation relationships. The behaviors seem to exist as traits, but the situations are somewhat unique.

The means in Table 2 and the correlations in Tables 3 and 4 give some insight into the relationships between the behaviors and the various situations. The use of a grid technique provides a fuller perspective on the relationships inferred from the summarized multitrait multimethod matrices.[43] This procedure uses eigenvectors to place both behaviors and situations in a reduced space (Figure 1). The points for behavior are reflected to compensate for the reversal of the scoring procedure used.

Figure 1 about here

The horizontal axis can be described as an "acceptability" dimension, with "traditional" and "substitution" behaviors indicating the least acceptable behaviors; "collegial support" and "normative" are more acceptable behaviors. The vertical axis relates to the role of tests, with "normative" and "traditional" involving the ethics of test-related behaviors. "Substitution" and "collegial-support" behaviors are less dependent on test-related behaviors; both behaviors involve opportunities not available to everyone.

A second interesting finding is that the "cone" of five situations is bounded by the perception of professors' beliefs and that of other students' behaviors. The spread of situations represents a least squares fit to the differences in perceived reaction to the four types of behavior. As previously

noted, the respondents perceived their beliefs as closer to those of their professors than to those of their peers. They also perceived their behaviors as separate from their beliefs. This separation is explained again by Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action by which people's subjective norms (their perceived social pressure) are a function of the normative beliefs (expectations) of various others in the environment.[58] Because a subjective norm exerts pressure to practice or not to practice a given behavior independent of a person's behavioral beliefs toward the behavior in question, this separation of beliefs from behaviors may indicate the relevance (and influence) of opportunity, an "external" variable. It is plausible that in large classes, for instance, where frequent contacts with less ethical colleagues may be possible, opportunities for "substitution" behavior are likely to increase.

Based on these results, summary answers to the four research questions posed at the outset are as follows:

- The students' ethical beliefs were moderate to high, based on the mean scores in Table 2. Each of the four mean dimension scores was lower than the midpoint of 3, and two such means were close to 1, indicating high ethical inclinations.
- The students' self-reported ethical behaviors were significantly related to their ethical beliefs, indicating that their beliefs were just as highly ethical as their actions. Behaviors that were perceived more ethically were practiced more frequently, and vice versa.
- The students' ethical beliefs and behaviors were both significantly higher than those they perceived held by "most college students."
- The students' ratings of their beliefs were significantly lower than those they perceived held by their professors.

Summary and Discussion

Our primary goal in the present research was to better understand the ethical inclinations of public relations students by investigating their reported ethical beliefs and behaviors about college work. Such evidence will enable public relations eduactors (and higher education administrators) develop meaningful approaches to addressing some of the ethical issues and challenges among students. The evidence provides a relevant framework for discussing ethics among students.

Given the lack of empirical investigation of self-reported ethical perceptions about college work among public relations students, it was important to identify underlying dimensions of ethical behavior among these students. Four such dimensions were discovered: "traditional," "normative," "collegial-support," and "substitution" behaviors. Analyses of these dimensions by doubly repeated measures ANOVA designs, spatial techniques, and multitrait-multimatrix matrices indicated that the students' ethical beliefs were moderately high, but were rated lower than those of their professors and higher than those of their colleagues. As noted previously, these results are consistent with those of previous research.[51] Recurring results of this type imply that ethics research will consistently find that everyone is "above average." However, because the public relations function epitomizes organizational conscience, one would expect that the students' belief ratings (Table 2) would be much lower than they were, particularly on two dimensions ("normative" and "collegial-support" behaviors) on which their mean belief scores were close to the midpoint of 3 ("somewhat unethical").

Based on Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action,[52] such results indicate that the two most frequently practiced ethical behaviors are associated with other students: collegial-support behaviors and normative behaviors. Both behaviors suggest the influence of subjective norms. These two behaviors are consistent with Broom's conceptualization of the communication technician role in public relations, a role usually played by entry-level public relations practitioners who are initially hired for their communication and journalistic skills.[53] Within organizations, the communication technician is not autonomous, but subjectively implements the (programmed) decisions of others. But the communication manager's position of autonomy acts as a safeguard against immorality and makes him or her best in making moral considerations.[54]

The role differentiation between technicians and managers has a major implication for the education of future public relations practitioners. Because the role-orientation teaching model of public relations education is one that combines elements of both managerial and technician roles,[55] public relations educators can prepare future practitioners by emphasizing the kinds of ethical situations that they might face initially as technicians and subsequently as managers. As Bivins observes in his discourse on the application of ethical theory to public relations, even though the weight for making ethical decisions lies with the public relations manager, this does not negate the need for the nonprofessional (for example, the entry-level practitioner) to carefully consider acts that are morally suspect.[56]

The acceptability of the ethical beliefs and behaviors of the public relations students is left to the reader. Certainly, the students considered themselves more ethical than other students. In addition, it seemed that their

beliefs held across the four major dimensions. On the average, some of these dimensions contained more acceptable behaviors than other dimensions. Behaving normatively and helping colleagues outside of a test situation are more acceptable than cheating in a test situation.

Beliefs and behaviors were consistent within the dimensions. Behaviors that were considered less ethical occurred less frequently. More ethical behaviors occurred more frequently. These conclusions are supported both by the means presented in Table 2 and by the monotrait-heterosituation correlations in Table 3. The evidence is not conclusive, however, since correlations and concurrence do not prove causation. Also, the correlations for both students (.35) and others (.41) show that beliefs only explain a limited amount of variance in behavior.

The results shown in Figure 1 imply that part of the remaining variance in behavior may be related to opportunity. Students who take tests face ethical decisions about cheating on the tests; students with similar beliefs will never cheat on tests if they never take tests.

Although these findings are interesting and perhaps promising, they are subject to two major limitations. First, because the findings are based on convenience samples from two mid-Atlantic state universities, they may have limited application in assessing the ethical inclinations of nationwide samples of the growing number of public relations students.

Second, methodological problems circumvent the measurement of ethics in business and business-related activities. Self-report measures are not always an accurate measure of behaviors. For example, if someone were a liar, why should we expect him or her to give truthful information on ethical

situations?[57] To ensure the validity of the self-report measures, this study used the multitrait-multimethod matrix procedure to further examine the various dimension scores. This procedure appears to be a promising research tool for understanding ethical beliefs and behaviors.

This study, nonetheless, has major implications for the role that higher education administrators and public relations educators could play in the ethical development of their students. As noted by Olasky, the public relations curriculum must emphasize ethics-oriented macro public relations courses and provide long-run education that continually addresses the changing environment of the practice.[58] Some courses might well start with considering those ethical behaviors most relevant to students and perceived at various levels of ethicalness. Such an approach could relate personal moral values, ethical perceptions and dilemmas, and socially accepted institutional ethics to several ethical situations, vignettes or cases that occur or could conceivably occur in the "real world." In the Trawick and Darden study, for example, marketing educators and practitioners ranked formal education at the top of factors that could improve ethics in marketing.[59] The respondents suggested that such education start at the beginning, not at the end, of the individual's education.

Hunt outlined several situations on which students, in their attempt to make ethical behavior a practical part of their daily lives as public relations practitioners, can write memos on ethical issues.[60] Arguing that such communication per se is an ethical act and that the use of language influences another person's perception and values, Rentz and Debs suggested a more comprehensive approach to teaching ethics in business communication courses than those currently being advocated.[61] This means that students should be

given various writing exercises to encourage them to (1) acknowledge the potency of language, as reflected in memos, reports, and other company documents, in sustaining or challenging an individual's or an organization's values; and (2) anticipate and analyze the complex interactions that will occur between using language and working within corporate value structures.

It is important to identify some of the broader research directions suggested by this study. There is need to test its findings among nationwide samples. Future research could (1) explore the effects of socially related courses on the ethical frames of reference of those students who elected or were required to take such courses, and (2) investigate by the use of longitudinal (panel) studies differences in ethical behaviors between different times, say, pre- and post-graduation periods. Also, what socialization processes or situations contribute to (or explain the lack of) high ethical inclinations? What broad social forces explain such behaviors?

While evidence of causation will also require future research, this study has demonstrated that such research on ethical beliefs can be enhanced by the multidimensional nature of the perceptual space. The results also suggest that "opportunity" be considered in future work linking belief to behavior. However, because the approach to formulating and enhancing public relations ethics lies with future practitioners, the results of this study are encouraging to those who would shape ethical beliefs to modify ethical behavior.

Footnotes

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6. John W. Felton, President of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), in the Official Program of the 40th National Conference of the PRSA, Los Angeles, November 8-11, 1988, p. 1.

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TABLE 1

Principal-Components Analysis Summary Table: Varimax Rotated Factor Loadings[a]

Item	Factor Label: Traditional	Normative	Collegial Support	Substitution	Communality
Obtaining answers during exam	.83	.12	.08	.06	.71
Giving answers during an exam	.74	.09	.07	.13	.58
Copying answers during exam	.73	.27	-.02	.08	.62
Arranging with others to give answers during an exam	.71	.26	.03	.17	.61
Using cheat sheets	.68	.09	.24	.05	.53
Buying a term paper	.48	.39	.05	.36	.52
Giving exam questions	.30	.76	.12	-.04	.69
Discussing exam questions	.15	.75	.13	-.05	.61
Working in groups when instructor requested that you work individually	.09	.72	.23	.13	.61
Using an unauthorized "test file"	.15	.61	.17	.13	.44
Using a stolen exam	.29	.58	.18	.13	.48
Changing a test paper	.21	.57	.03	.28	.45
Obtaining an old test	.03	.50	.31	-.35	.48
Using another's computer file improperly	.19	.48	.22	.20	.36

TABLE 1 continues

TABLE 1 (continued)

Item[a]	Factor Label: Traditional	Normative	Collegial Support	Substitution	Communality
Failing to report unfavorable grading errors	-.04	-.05	.70	-.02	.50
Committing plagiarism	.14	.19	.62	.20	.48
Studying from another's notes	.01	.21	.56	-.10	.37
Not contributing share in a group project	.10	.12	.55	.06	.33
Falsifying or fabricating a bibliography	.31	.34	.53	-.03	.49
Copying homework	.32	.18	.45	.17	.37
Visiting a professor after an exam to bias grading	.05	.38	.40	-.11	.32
Taking a test for another	.07	-.06	-.00	.79	.64
Having another write term paper	.19	.26	.23	.70	.65
Having another take test	.36	.09	-.06	.61	.52
Writing term paper for another	.03	.38	.37	.40	.45

TABLE 1 continues

TABLE 1 (continued)

Item	Factor Label: Traditional	Normative	Collegial Support	Substitution	Communality
Other Item					
Interfering with another's studio or lab work or deliberately misinforming another student	-.06	.23	.28	.16	.16

[a] Items with underlined loadings were used in computing the scores for the corresponding ethical dimensions that were used in subsequent analyses. Items were used on factors on which they had high loadings. Where an item had high comparable loadings on more than one factor, the content of the item was the criterion for its use.

TABLE 2

A Comparison of Mean Dimension Scores, by Students' Perceptions

Behavior	Students' Beliefs[a]	Most College Students' Beliefs[a]	Professors' Beliefs[a]	Students' Behaviors[b]	Most College Students' Behaviors[b]
1. Traditional Behavior					
Mean	1.23	1.98	1.08	4.81	3.39
(SD)	(.396)	(.842)	(.314)	(.420)	(.874)
2. Normative Behavior					
Mean	2.12	3.00	1.52	4.18	2.91
(SD)	(.660)	(.755)	(.459)	(.588)	(.676)
3. Collegial Support Behavior					
Mean	2.45	3.26	1.98	4.08	2.76
(SD)	(.568)	(.699)	(.526)	(.539)	(.646)
4. Substitution Behavior					
Mean	1.39	2.04	1.12	4.88	3.83
(SD)	(.515)	(.850)	(.327)	(.376)	(.758)

[a] A score of "1" indicated that respondents perceived the behavior as "very unethical," while "5" indicated that it was "not at all unethical." A **lower** mean score, therefore, indicated a higher ethical inclination.

[b] A score of "1" indicated that respondents practiced the behavior "at every opportunity," while "5" indicated that it was "never" practiced. A **higher** mean score, therefore, indicated a higher ethical inclination.

TABLE 3

A Summary of Multitrait-Multimethod Correlation Matrix, by Situations[a]

Behavior	Situation				
	Students' Beliefs	Most College Students' Beliefs	Professors' Beliefs	Students' Behaviors	Most College Students' Behaviors
1. Students' Beliefs	(.40)	.17	.14	.18	.05
2. Most College Students' Beliefs	.28	(.71)	.19	.05	.31
3. Professors' Beliefs	.25	.27	(.47)	.07	.06
4. Students' Behaviors	.35	.09	.12	(.47)	.13
5. Most College Students' Behaviors	.08	.41	.08	.26	(.69)

[a] Values **on** the diagonal show average divergence of traits (beliefs) within situation. Values **below** the diagonal are average trait validities between situations. Values **above** the diagonal are contextual "noise" (heterotrait-heterosituation).

Note: Values **on** the diagonal are enclosed in parentheses.

TABLE 4

A Summary of Multitrait-Multimethod Correlation Matrix, by Behaviors[a]

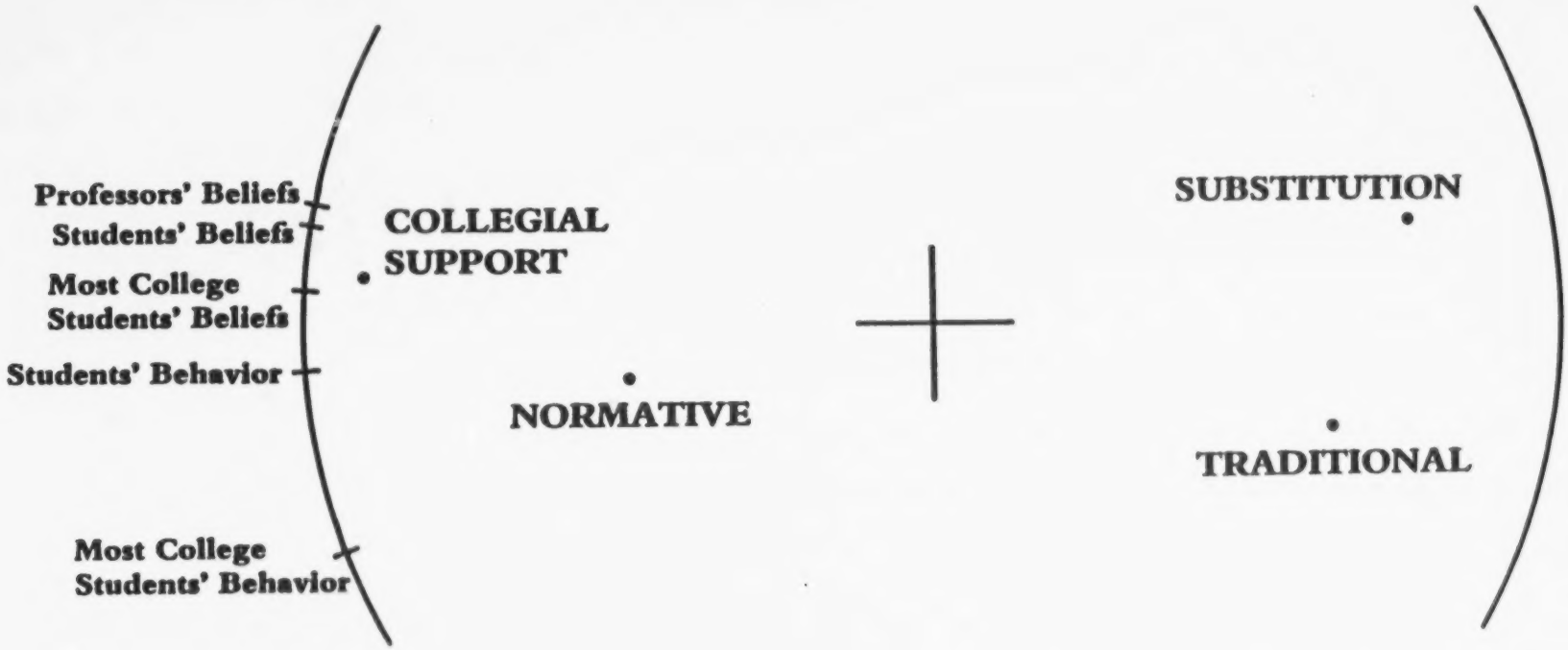
Item	Behavior			
	Traditional	Normative	Collegial Support	Substitution
1. Traditional	(.175)	.088	.065	.110
2. Normative	.500	(.288)	.187	.085
3. Collegial Support	.451	.620	(.290)	.052
4. Substitution	.787	.464	.405	(.125)

[a] Values on the diagonal are trait (belief) validities averaged over situations. Values **below** the diagonal are the divergence of the traits within situation averaged over the five situations. Values **above** the diagonal are contextual "noise" (heterotrait-heterobehavior).

Note: Values on the validity diagonal are enclosed in parentheses.

FIGURE 1

A Grid Analysis of Ethical Behaviors and Situations in Two Dimensions[a]



[a] These dimensions are on the horizontal axis (the "acceptability" dimension) and on the vertical axis (the "test-related" dimension).

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